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## Jamie Robertson: Make for Higher Ground

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## Jamie Robertson: Make for High Ground

**Alabama Contemporary  
Art Center** | Mobile, Alabama

**May 12–July 15, 2023**

**W**ater—and the ways it can be used to address fluid histories and experiences, physically and psychologically—has been the impetus behind several recent art exhibitions across the U.S. This includes the Chapter

House’s virtual *but when you come from water*, the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey’s *The First Water is the Body*, the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art’s *Maya Lin: A Study of Water*, the Nevada Museum of Art’s *Water by Design*, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s



**Figure 1.** Jamie Robertson, *Waters I: Look for Me*, from the *Waters* series, 2021-ongoing, video. Photograph: Elizabeth S. Hawley.

*Water Memories*, to name a few.<sup>1</sup> The works on view in these shows address a range of historical and contemporary concerns: bringing to the surface violent diasporic ruptures and environmental devastation as well as the nourishing of cultural connections and sustainable futures.

The Alabama Contemporary Art Center (ACAC) added to this current by showcasing the work of Houston-based artist Jamie Robertson in *Make for High Ground*, a joint curatorial effort between ACAC curator Allison Schaub and the artist, whose proposed solo show was selected for the ACAC's Independent Projects.<sup>2</sup> This multi-media installation examined the socio-political and spiritual relationships between Blackness, water, and memory. Using video, text, and photography, Robertson interrogates how water functions as a capaciously cleaving force, evoking violent separations even as it maintains relational ties.

The show centers on Robertson's *Waters* (2021-ongoing), a series of three videos that specifically approach the socio-politics of waterways from the perspective of the Gulf South and the histories and experiences of Blackness therein—an aspect of the work that differentiates *Make for High Ground* from the aforementioned exhibitions, most of which take broader approaches to geography and identity. Located in the Gulf port city of Mobile, the ACAC served as a fitting venue for the videos, which highlight historical events occurring in this city as well as Galveston, Texas, and Biloxi, Mississippi.

*Waters I: Look for Me* focuses on Robertson's home state of Texas and considers the infamous Storm of 1900 in Galveston, a massive hurricane that remains the deadliest natural disaster in U.S. history. This Category 4 storm caused a surge of over fifteen feet that led to extensive flooding, destroyed more than 3,600 buildings, inflicted over \$20 million in damages (well over \$600 million today), and killed at least 8,000 people in the city limits of Galveston alone. Like all three videos, *Waters I* was projected on the wall of the ACAC's Gallery D—a dark, low-ceilinged, windowless space that lends itself to screened and projected work. The piece commences with, and takes its title from, a 1928 Marcus Garvey speech that includes the lines, “in death I shall be a terror.... Look for me in the whirlwind or the storm, look for me all around you, for, with God's grace, I shall come and bring with me countless millions of black slaves who have died.” Robertson includes this text to recast the storm as a form of vengeance for diasporic Black communities.<sup>3</sup>

As the letters fade, crashing waves appear, enveloping the viewer's field of vision. The camera angle dips above and below the waterline as roiling white, foamy waters wash over colored filters, morphing from green to blue to yellow and back again. Audio of the waves plays overhead while a disembodied voice asks, “Did you hear them?” before describing “a terrible shout” and “how the land gave way to the sea.” The visual and auditory effect is dizzying, giving a sense of the chaos of the storm. As the frothing waters recede in the video, historic photographs

depicting Black survivors amongst the wreckage fade in and out (fig. 1). Robertson seeks to honor those who lived through the storm and, in its wake, assisted in rebuilding Galveston. Her decision to focus on these positive representations of Black figures is significant; accounts of the era draw from racist tropes in conjuring up specters of Black looters in deeply racialized terms that are familiar to anyone who followed mainstream media reporting in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.<sup>4</sup>

*Waters II: Memories with Bones* highlights the history of the *Clotilda*, the last known slave ship to arrive in the U.S., carrying 110 West African captives. Though the importation of enslaved Africans had officially been banned in 1808, the practice continued illegally, and the *Clotilda* reached Mobile in 1860. The captain then had the ship taken up the Mobile River, where it was scuttled and burned to destroy evidence of the illegal slave trade. When the *Clotilda*'s survivors were freed in 1865 by Union soldiers, thirty-two of them pooled their resources to found Africatown, a community three miles north of downtown Mobile.

*Waters II* features the calmer currents of the Mobile River, with the sky above seen from beneath the gently moving water; for much of the video, the camera is in the position of the sunk *Clotilda* at the bottom of the riverbed. A Toni Morrison quote appears at the start of the piece: “All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.” Text and audio throughout the video cite Igbo proverbs and translated West African sayings that further connect



water with memories. Particularly powerful are the words “The Mobile River remembers the shape of the Clotilda” and “Its skeleton lies there, buried in silt,” which materialize in white letters barely legible against the flowing waters. At one point, a ghostly black woman in a white dress appears, and the artist, similarly attired, walks over to stand beside her, their inverted figures projected along a pier (fig. 2). The women embody inextricable links of Black experiences, past and present, hovering along the currents. The video then broadcasts

the names of Africatown founders one by one across the screen: Kupollee, Rose Allen, Omolabi . . . As the piece concludes, the camera lens comes up from the depths of the river and breaks the surface, a visual echo of the Clotilda’s narrative: the ship was rediscovered in 2018, giving historical credence to the memories that Africatown residents have long held.<sup>5</sup>

*Waters III: A Question* centers on the wade-in of April 24, 1960, in Biloxi, Mississippi. This was a peaceful protest organized by local physician

**Figure 2.** Jamie Robertson, *Waters II: Memories with Bones*, from the *Waters* series, 2021-ongoing, video. Photograph: Elizabeth S. Hawley.

Gilbert R. Mason, Sr., who led 125 Black men, women, and children in taking a stand against the segregated public beaches of Mississippi. The event turned violent when white segregationists attacked the demonstrators with pipes, chains, and rocks, firing shots over their heads. Police stood by, refusing to intervene. The absurdity of segregated beaches and the violence



of that day are underscored by Robertson's video. After an opening view of a contemporary recording of the pier along the waterfront of this Biloxi beach (fig. 3), the camera lens dives into the water and turns upwards from the depths as words from the piece's central question appear one by one against the currents: "How" - "do" - "you" - "segregate" - "water?" At this last word, the video turns blood-red as a silhouetted photograph of the wade-in flashes across the screen and a score of jarring instrumental sounds evokes the blows suffered by protestors. The words appear again and again, faster each sequence, with the brutality of the wade-in underscored by intermittent scarlet filters. At the end

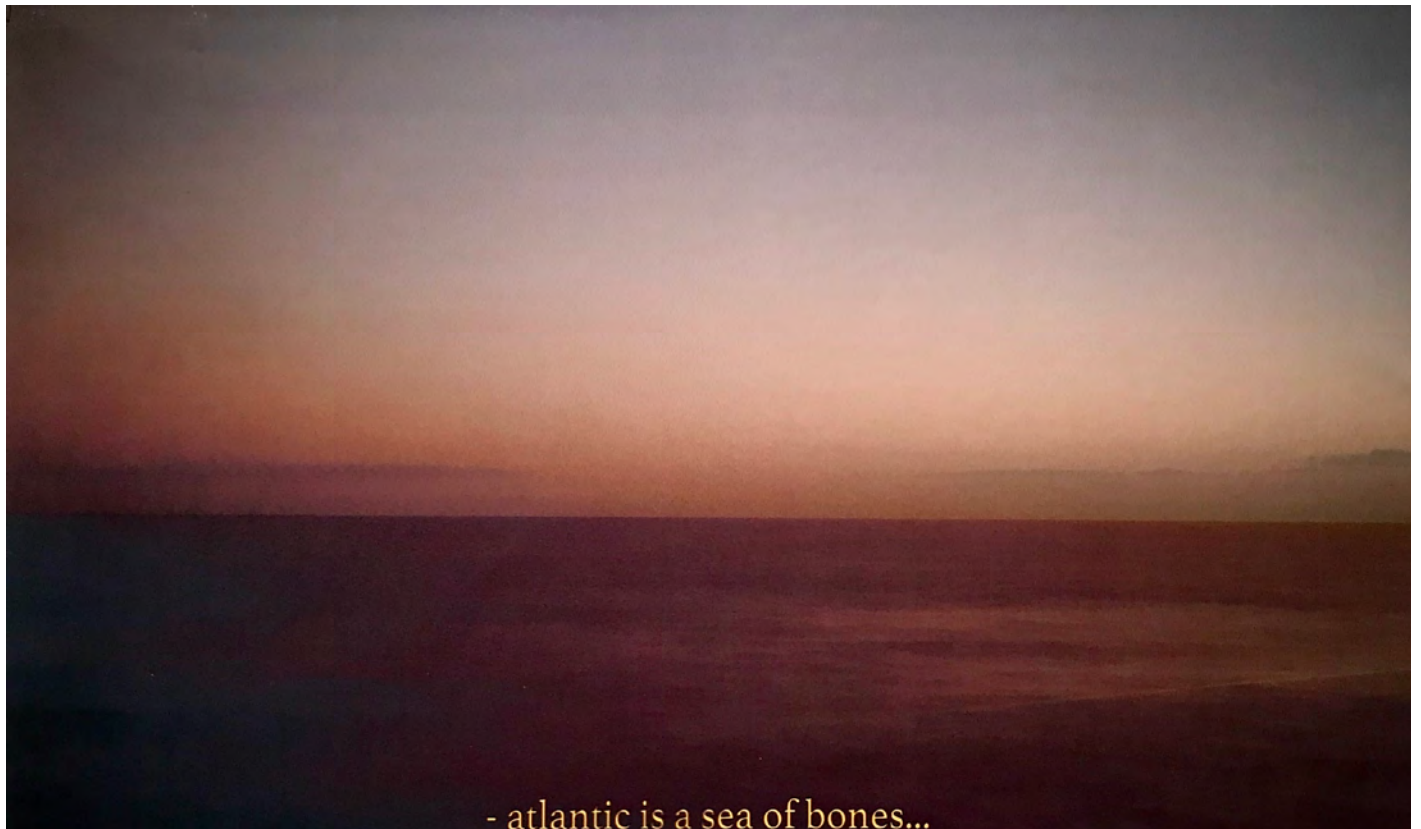
of the video, a peaceful shot of waves lapping against the beach appears, calling gulls replacing the beating soundtrack. Mississippi beaches were finally made accessible to all community members, regardless of race, by 1968.<sup>6</sup>

The three videos were projected large-scale on three separate walls, one after the other; as one video was playing, the other two walls were blank. The installation thus compelled the viewer to move about the gallery, echoing the video suite's traversal of time and space. A sheet of clear plastic was laid out on the floor in front of the projections and as the video played, its imagery was reflected below, as

**Figure 3.** Jamie Robertson, *Waters III: A Question*, from the *Waters* series, 2021-ongoing, video. Photograph: Elizabeth S. Hawley.

if over a body of water. The effects of this installation strategy cued the viewer to the ways these historical events are interconnected, even as they represent discrete occurrences; they are waves of the same storm.

The videos appeared in a gallery to the left, while the right was devoted to photographs and an installation produced to accompany the *Waters* suite, as well as vinyl lettering of the Garvey and Morrison texts that appear in the videos. These excerpts were joined in this part of



the exhibition by Lucille Clifton's poetry, lines from which appear juxtaposed against photographs of waterways. One particularly poignant image featured a calm sea at dawn or dusk, with the line "atlantic is a sea of bones" appearing at the lower edge of the piece (fig. 4). The work recalls *Waters II*, and the ways Robertson characterizes the *Clotilda* as a skeleton, personifying the ship itself as representative of its enslaved passengers—and those who suffered the same ordeal. Other lines of text appearing in *Waters II* read, "The Mobile River holds memories of them" followed by "As well as the many others like them," indicating, like the photograph, that local memories flow into deeper historical currents.

*Make for High Ground*—the title of which comes from another Clifton poem published in the collection *How to Carry Water: Selected Poems of Lucille Clifton*—is a powerful solo show by an artist whose dedication to Black lives, experiences, and memories in the Gulf South comes through in her lyrical yet searing works.<sup>7</sup> The only limitations of the exhibition were installation and information-based: the audio was difficult to hear over the gallery's AC system, and information on the events referenced by the *Waters* videos was sparse.

Yet the refusal to provide a complete narrative and pristine viewing experience might also be interpreted as a conceptual strategy. As the title wall text asks: "If so much racialized violence and Black

**Figure 4.** Jamie Robertson, *Clifton: atlantic is a sea of bones*, 2023, inkjet print. Photograph: Elizabeth S. Hawley.

history has been lost to the history books, how might we remember?" Waterways offer a means to fluidly connect fragmented experiences and memories that are incomplete due to physical and epistemological violence. Asking viewers to sit with partial, half-heard narratives, and ruminate on the reasons that they exist as such, is a potent way of pointing to the fact that history has never been neutral, and it frequently obscures the experiences of marginalized communities. Requiring that interested viewers do further research, moreover, may be a way of refusing the burden of education so often placed on Black

community members who are expected to explain complex issues of identity, history (or lack thereof), and experience to others. Robertson steers events of the past into the gallerygoer's present; leaving how deeply they choose to wade in up to them.

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## Endnote

1. *but when you come from water*, virtual exhibition at the Chapter House, <https://www.thechapterhouse.org/2021-but-when-you-come-from-water>, April 1–May 31, 2021; *The First Water is the Body*, Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit, New Jersey, October 9, 2021–January 23, 2022; *Maya*

*Lin: A Study of Water*, Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, Virginia Beach, Virginia, April 21–September 4, 2022; *Water by Design*, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, Nevada, August 20, 2022–March 19, 2023; and *Water Memories*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York, June 23, 2022–April 2, 2023.

2. More on the ACAC Independent Projects can be found on their website: <https://www.alabamacontemporary.org/opportunities/independent-projects/>.

3. Robertson emphasizes this aspect of the video on her website: <https://www.jamievrobertson.com/waters-suite>.

4. On the racist coverage of the Storm of 1900 in Galveston and its aftermath, see Patricia Bellis Bixel and Elizabeth Hayes Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm: Catastrophe and Catalyst* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000). See also Andy Horowitz, “The Racial Strife That Can Blow in With a Hurricane,” *Washington Post*, August 25, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/08/25/hurricane-harvey-threatens-more-than-you-think/>.

[www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/08/25/hurricane-harvey-threatens-more-than-you-think/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/08/25/hurricane-harvey-threatens-more-than-you-think/).

5. The Clotilda was rediscovered in large part thanks to the efforts of journalist Ben Raines, whose book on the process of locating the wreckage, the history of the ship, and contemporary descendants of the Clotilda and Africatown informs my reading of Robertson's works. See Ben Raines, *The Last Slave Ship: The True Story of How Clotilda was Found, Her Descendants, and an Extraordinary Reckoning* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022).

6. On the history of the Biloxi wade-ins, see Gilbert R. Mason and James Patterson Smith, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots: A Black Doctor's Civil Rights Struggle* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).

7. Lucille Clifton, *How to Carry Water: Selected Poems of Lucille Clifton*, ed Aracelis Girmay (Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 2020).